



21.2. 2005 [189-200]

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# ON THE AFRICAN CONCEPT OF TRANSCENDENCE: CONFLATING NATURE, NURTURE AND CREATIVITY

## ABSTRACT

Makalah ini hendak mendekonstruksi polaritas antara natur yang dianggap pasip, liar dan feminin dan kultur yang yang dianggap dinamis, maskulin. Sambil menolak tesis Beauvoir, tubuh perempuan dikembalikan sebagai mekanisme generatif dan konstruktif yang bersifat transenden. Bumi yang perempuan dan perempuan yang membumi adalah proyeksi abstrak tubuh bangsa Afrika sendiri. Ketercabikan perempuan parallel dengan nasib bangsa Afrika yang dimutilasi oleh perang, kemiskinan, penyakit, kolonialisme dan postkolonialitas. Dalam kerangka pandang Afrika, natur dan kultur adalah matriks dari keperempuanan yang berkodrat *nurture* yang mengandung kemampuan prokreasi dan kreativitas.

## Key Words:

*Nature • culture • nurture • transcendence • immanence • femalism • mother earth • women earth • pasivity • reproduction • productivity • creativity*

The conceptual paradigm which polarizes nature from culture is as relative as it is subjective. Nature is in the main subordinated to culture which is deemed to have mastered space. While nature is shoved into the mould of primitivity, culture is linked with the technological, scientific and political. Men as a matter of course are closely associated with the rational culture. Women represent the irrational and the emotional. From the point of view of Freudian psychoanalysis men embody culture and women the lack and the natural. In his biological paradigm of sexual dualism Sigmund Freud relegates woman to inert nature and the sphere of biological essentialism which is underscored by his catch phrase: Anatomy is destiny.

Subsequent feminist praxis set in motion by French existentialist and feminist writer, Simone de Beauvoir, expressly negates the binary opposition of nature and culture. This stems essentially from the fact that nature on the one hand connotes passivity, inactivity and otherness while culture on the other hand evokes virility and dynamism in the Manichaean world of opposing forces. In this sphere, the transcending phallus which emblemises man, subordinates the biologically compartmentalized woman steeped in immanence.

This paper will make a modest attempt at deconstructing the fixed polarity of wild, inert nature and dynamic culture. Our thesis will be a negation of Beauvoir's repugnance of nature. The female body, as an essential biological site will be foregrounded as a transcendent mechanism of constructive and generative nature. The incarnation of transcendence will in consequence be hinged on the Other the matrix of nature and nurture. Applying the theory of femalism, a variant of African feminism, the female body as well as mothering will constitute the systemic site of discourse and hermeneutics. Parallels will be drawn between the lacerated female body and the mutilated African nation jostled by wars, poverty, disease, colonialism and postcoloniality. Simply put, the feminized African country evokes Mother Earth, Woman Earth - an abstract projection of the African female body. The scarred body not only aligns with the spiritual in the representation of the natural and the cosmic but also manifests the dents of a scrambled and ailing nation. In the mothering of texts, we shall limn some African writers, transcending to embrace the Satrean concept of freedom. The existent may, however, in spinning the web of transcendence in a utopian precinct subordinate reproductive maternity to productive creative art.

## **AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSCENDENCE**

Transcendence, an existentialist terminology, embraces reality in the struggle for existence. Distinguishing between the existent and being Heidegger posits:

The existent which is the mode of existence is man. Man alone exists. The rock is but does not exist. The tree is but does not exist. The angel is but does not exist. God is but does not exist. (see Oizerman 190)

These metaphysical and inanimate objects may be analogous to Husserl's *eide* or phenomenological essences which in the main have no existence. Hinging its ontology of human existence on Husserl's phenomenology, existentialism strives to surmount the dichotomy between subject and object. Being and consciousness are dualized in the existentialist ontology. In transcending or going outside itself, consciousness cannot become being; nor being consciousness.

From the existentialist perspective, every consciousness is, indeed, a transcendence that effects its freedom in relentlessly emerging and surpassing itself in the direction of other freedoms. For Sartre human consciousness or nothingness (*néant*) is in contraposition with being or thingness (*être*). A "gratuitous activity", freedom is deemed a distinct vehicle for human struggle. Existentialist tenets exhort action in one part and contemns passivity in another. Simone de Beauvoir has deftly expatiated on this ideology as follows:

Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the *en-soi* the brutish (life of subjection to given conditions... (Xxxiii).

One must therefore, exercise one's freedom in transcendence. The inability to exercise this freedom results in immanence. Where another person constitutes a stumbling block to freedom, that act would be viewed as oppression. The individual's existence has to be justified in the express action of fleeing from oppression, transcending oneself and engaging in projects which are freely chosen.

The essential elements of transcendence are by the above analysis conceptualized as action, choice, freedom and consciousness. These are

starkly contrasted with stagnation and oppression encapsulated in immanence which usually represents women as the Other. Woman is, in her biological role of perpetuating the human species closely associated with raw nature. It is in regard that Beauvoir contends that, "In maternity woman remained closely bound to her body like an animal" (73). Man on the contrary is the "being of transcendence" who dominates Woman Earth. Beauvoir unequivocally implies that motherhood reduces woman to the animal nature of *en-soi*.

While the politically conscious African may subscribe to Beauvoir's thesis that marriage confines woman to immanence, the African concept of transcendence consists essentially in creativity and nurturance, which activities do not in the main preclude maternity. African womanhood is indeed deemed incomplete without the mothering role which women freely choose as viable projects. Women in essence transcend in their choice to be mothers. This launches them into that noble activity of self-fulfilling procreation which empowers them and puts them on the cultural pedestal. By contrast, the barren woman is subjected to the mould of immanence and is in consequence disparaged and deemed passive in view of a freedom not duly exercised and a project not typically executed.

In the exposition of bio-political issues related to production and reproduction, the positive elements of the procreative female is foregrounded in African feminism. In the vein of corporeal feminism which views the body in its physicality, femalism, a hue of African feminism stresses the female body in the raw. The organs of reproduction womb, breasts are in the main viewed as agents of female empowerment. In the light of this, birth songs constitute palpable panegyrics of creative mothering and nurturing motherhood. These are artistically put together in the oral mode as an invaluable repertoire of nurture deftly sculpted in nature.

The female body is as a matter of course extolled beyond such fixed essences as biological essentialism. Motherhood as we have earlier stated is a free choice for most African women who see it as the culmination of the female self. The *choice to become* a mother is deemed a "responsible free agency" in the express assertion of transcendence. In choosing between this assertion of her transcendence and her alienation as an Other, an object, the female existent savours her mothering activity which pragmatically translates to a laudable project. The woman who fails to fulfill this role is seen to be wallowing in passivity. In the same vein the production of texts is considered at the metaphorical level as artistic mothering. The entire productivity in creative arts is, in effect, viewed as a

vehicle to freedom.

The African nation which is analogous to a battered female body, is in essence the focus of both the first and second generations of African writers committed to the freedom of a nation. It is in view of this commitment that femalism and African feminism in its entirety link the freedom of woman to that of the African nation. The female nurturing body is graphically balanced with the female continent Mother Africa susceptible to various manipulations and intrigues. Woman, in her capacity as an embodied subject of culturally ascribed nurturing roles undergoes cultural mutilation, ambiguities and patriarchal anachronistic yearnings. Mother Africa, a palpable receptacle of mother nature assumes an ontological status as a feminized abstract projection of the African female body. This body not only aligns with the metaphysical in the representation of nature but encapsulates the jolts of a turbulent continent on the historical trajectory.

### **RAW NATURE, CORRUPT CULTURE AND CREATIVE FREEDOM**

Freedom is as phenomenological as it is practical in the peculiar African condition scorched by slavery, colonialism and globalization. Most of African great works of art are lucidly committed to a holistic liberation. In his treatise, *What Is Literature?* Sartre contends that:

The book is not, like the tool, a means for any end whatever; the end to which it offers itself is the reader's freedom. And the Kantian expression finality without end seems to me quite inappropriate for designating the work of art (33)

The main aim and object in writing is for the author to address himself or herself to the freedom of the reader. If literature is an indispensable agent of liberation, committed writers universally strive to imbibe the Sartreian concept of freedom which consists in writers applying their antological freedom to the actualization of social freedom. The freedom of writing necessitates the freedom of the citizenry. Literature is therefore meant to throw the writer into a drawn battle for human freedom.

African writing is, in the main, protest literature. When Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to counter the colonialist propaganda that Africa is the Heart of Darkness, he was protesting in one part and liberating his reader in another. Colonial literature which preceded African literature reeked of racism and warped truth. Africa was portrayed by these bigoted

writers as a *tabula rasa* steeped in stark darkness which urgently needed some form of civilization enlightenment as well as a beacon of light. Achebe set out to debunk the fallacy that Africa had no culture. He depicted the rich cultural heritage of his people in his early novels. The local colour in his works reflected nature and nurture. As the Western civilizing mission superimposed an imported foreign culture onto the African environment, the sonorous clash between raw nature and alienating Western culture resulted in anomie or conflict of norms. Nakedness as a matter of course distinctly in sharp contrast with nudity. In Ali Mazrui own words: stood out

Sociologists have distinguished between nudity, which is *natural* state without clothes, and nakedness; which is the state of being undressed. The latter often has sexual suggestiveness, implying focus on the vital organs, (58; emphasis supplied).

Nudity evokes not only the idyllic setting of the pre-lapsarian Garden of Eden but also the pristine pre-colonial Africa, the pulative Heart of Darkness portrayed by Joseph Conrad. The nudity in this milieu and era encompasses wholesome nature. Nakedness conversely denotes a synthetic African culture stripped of its vital essence by a civilizing mission and beset with ambivalence and utter corruption. Nakedness is in effect brazen-faced, humiliating and exploitative. Nudity is on the contrary bliss by virtue of its salient features of ingenuousness and openness. Nudity metaphorically preceded nakedness which marked the state of acute anomie in African socio-cultural milieu.

The aftermath of devastating colonization, and post-independence confusion as well as disillusionment was imminent social disorder. The new African leaders became abysmally corrupt and the society grossly materialistic as the people's appetite for conspicuous consumption grew uncontrollably. It became obvious that the dystopia of purulent social and political institutions constituted some form of imprisonment. In the vein of Isaiah Berlin who describes the universe as a prison, Nigerian notable writer Ken Saro Wiwa in his thesis novel *Prisoners of Jebs* (1988) depicts Africa/Nigeria as a consummate prison. It is salient to note that the metaphor of darkness or nudity transfigures to that of imprisonment or nakedness. It behoves the existent to embark on the "gratuitous activity" of freedom. Since freedom implies social responsibility, the committed writer exhorts the reader to action. As Sartre has succinctly put it "commitment is an act not a word". Saro-Wiwa not only appealed to the reader's consciousness but also embarked on a brazen militancy which pre-maturely

sent him to the gallows. This according to Sartreian philosophy was not preordained but arose from freedom and responsibility.

Responsibility as a form of transcendence for an African is nurtured from the nuclear homestead and extends to the wider social circle. The saying *ana/eshi nulo maramma fuo na ama* (One beautifies oneself at home before stepping out into the arena) is relevant in a typical culture where the lofty act of procreation is prioritized over most other social commitments. Since the typical African male would take stock of his human investment crystallized in children who would perpetuate his family line, before assessing his material wealth, the womb that begets the child is as potent as the mighty pen.

Some utopian African writers have, however, in attempting to break away from a consuming corrupt modern culture subordinated the creative womb to the creative hand. The nudity of olden days is evoked in the biotic space of creative hands. These talents thrive in nature and are nurtured in transcendence. Utopian writers have largely had to look back to the classical Golden Age that preceded the current decadent era of yellow brass and iron which border on a dystopia. A number of literary critics such as Frederick Ivor Case are of the view that "utopia exists in the past" (quoted in Ogwude 216). Charles Nnolim on his own part submits that:

A people's world view is reflected in their concept of utopia and this concept can help determine their future... a forward looking future people first reflect this orientation in their utopia literature while a backward looking concept of utopian literature depicts the world view of a people who either love to revel in a glorious past or are satisfied with the present. Europe and the West...represent the former while Africa and Africans in the Diaspora represent the latter (4).

In the backward looking utopian African societies, nature is accented to the occlusion of an alien modern culture engulfing an African culture which has intrinsically been polluted by alienation and ambivalence. It should be noted that both the colonized woman and man are relegated as the Other in the mould of immanence under the thumb of the Western imperialist -the Subject and the One. It is from this dystopia that the utopian African writer seeks a transformative escape in a natural haven.

## THE HEART OF CONFLATION AND UTOPIANISM

Many a utopian African writer creates an atmosphere of freedom in the transcendent space of tranquility and action the biotic community in the deep forest. Ghanaian militant writer, Ayi Kwei Armah portrays creative healers immune to post-independence putridity in the wild where procreation cedes to creative healing. The shift in focus is predicated on the pragmatic and heuristic nature of African concept of transcendence. Phenomenological in its outlook; this ideology subsumes the spiritual in its deep consciousness. Healing, creativity and nurture, which emanate from the heart, conflate positively in an idyllic pastoral milieu reeking of the metaphysical which is palpable in African cosmology.

Kenyan socialist writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has in his distinctly philosophical novel *Devil on the Cross* defined the human heart, soul or conscience explicitly:

The human heart in flesh and is not made by man. The heart is borne by the body and in turn becomes the body. There is in man an organ called the heart (51).

Ngugi goes further to elucidate the two categories of the human heart:

Therefore there are two hearts; the heart built by the clan of parasites, the evil heart, and the heart built by the clan of producers, the good heart (53-54).

The evil hearts belong to the corrupt, parasitic clan of capitalist leaders and in effect the entire materialistic society. The good hearts are created in utopian settings starkly contrasted with fetid and philistine post-independence society. Ali Mazrui has noted that African capitalism "by combining the quest for profit with the desire for prestige has combined in sharpening the acquisitive instinct alongside the urge to consume" (60). Ayi Kwei Armah poignantly satirizes this materialistic inclination in post-Independence Ghanaian society in his two early novels. *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Fragments* (1974). His authorial vision, nevertheless, leaned towards utopianism in his later novels *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (1978). The nudity of the forests constituted the seed-bed of creativity and healing in these two novels where the artists and healers endowed with good hearts choose to be productive in freedom and tranquillity emanating from nature. These male and female producers have indeed translated their reflexivity into action.

Obviously signifying on the utopian enclave in Armah's grove of



productivity, Kenyan female writer, Rebeka Njau, creates the sacred grove in her latest novel, *The Sacred Seed*. Such a sacred space where webs of transcendence are spun falls under Mary Daly's category of exodus community "the space of the women's revolution" (353). The female protagonist Tesa Kogi Kenga, a talented music teacher had been raped by the evil-hearted and parasitic President Dixon Chinusi in the Castle of Doom. A site of rape, corruption and materialism. The Castle of Doom is a microcosm of neo-colonial African sterility and fetidity with an ailing economy.

The consciousness of the utterly devastated Tesa is stoked as she chooses to embark on a journey of individuation to Mumbi's sacred grove a holistic and wholesome site of spirituality and creativity. Love underlies tolerance, co-creation and accommodation in this community. We are told that;

Around this place, a new relationship with the soil, the trees, the plants and the water will be born, and hope, confidence and love will replace the spirit of fear and hatred (44).

Biodiversity which is the variability of all living organisms inclusive of animals, is very relevant to this natural world. The community comprises the framework of the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and habitats which maintain essential living resources such as forests and wild life. It is therefore, a negation of Cartesian anthropocentric postulate that only beings endowed with souls should merit analytical and discursive attention. In this world of expansive nature, Fina, the bird is portrayed as Mumbi's close companion. Njau ultimately spins a "seamless web" between human, plant and animal life in this idyllic forest where creativity, healing, myth, spirituality and love abound. The soulless, guilty and profane are shut out of this precinct of natural medicinal roots, herbs, barks, leaves and seeds.

Given the fact that African concept of transcendence is hardly agnostic, the grove is as hallowed as it is sacred. The grove, which is a matrix of activity, nature and nudity, is diametrically opposed to the crass retrogression and inertness which mark the Castle of Doom. The corrupt post-colonial African culture of nakedness is limned in both the parasitic administration of President Dixon and that of Pastor Jonah. Echoes of Ngugi are resonant in the portraiture of the evil-hearted Pastor Jonah of Kiambatu Church. He misappropriates the funds of his congregation who are ultimately expropriated. Kiambatu Church like most other churches is emblematic of religiosity or false religion which is starkly contrasted with

esoteric female spirituality evident in the sacred grove. Both Chinusi and Jonah had conspired to acquire the Kimina forest and destroy the sacred grove under the guise of building a school for the community.

Their nefarious act is flagrant oppression; for they constitute a stumbling block to individual and national freedom. The violation of the verdant, green, biotic and exodus community evokes the violation of the undefiled female body in the following statement:

The beautiful forest with its virgin scented wood, and the springs of cool waters was in danger of being raped and destroyed by people with uncontrollable desire to rape not only innocent women, but nature's heritage (164).

This is redolent of ecofeminism which draws a fine analogy between the violation of nature and that of womankind. Both the forest and woman are inextricably linked with sublime nature which stands the risk of being contaminated. Strategically located in this biotic community of wholesome nature and vibrancy is the Kimina pool, one of the dwelling places of the flora, fauna and ancestral spirits. This pool underscores the serenity and sacredness of the hallowed space antithetical to the mundane corruption of a vulnerable and ailing culture.

Of worthy significance is the fact that in this vibrant haven at the heart of nature are good-hearted inhabitants who spin intricate and delicate webs of transcendence that subtly occludes sexual relationship. Just like some women in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* who chose to be fundis or creative artists instead of being wives, Tesa was predestined to lead a celibate life. In concert with Freud's theory of sublimation, these women apply their sexual instincts to the sublime goals of creative artistry. This is redolent of Plato's Republic where people were not expected to be married. True the celibate existent excels in the utopian thought as the harbinger of consuming freedom.

Transcendence universally denotes consciousness, action, freedom and choice. Since it is Sartre's contention that literature is a sort of social action and that commitment is an act not a word, the act of commitment or *engagement* which is hinged on consciousness is decidedly dynamic. For the African, the entire action embraces nature which is not in the least passive or inert. In drawing parallels between nature and the female body, both become the matrices of nurture which includes procreation and creativity. Similarly an analogy is drawn between the battered female body and a traumatized African nation. Both generate a struggle which is meant to

culminate in unalloyed freedom.

Clearly such socio-historical realities have spawned multi-layered artistic productions in Africa. They have in the main echoed distinct pessimistic thoughts informed by postcolonial unsavoury experiences which have generated committed backward-looking utopian writings. Idyllic natural space serves as a shelter, a salubrious escape from a polluted and corrupt African culture reeking of fetid ambivalence. Nature provides a solace in the pastoral ambience. A synthesis of nature, nurture and creativity is ultimately effected in realistic as well as idealistic visions. Choices and actions are projected as the distinctive facets of individual liberation viewed as an essential tool for human struggle.

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